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Chronic causes of school violence at secondary schools in South Africa: Case of King Cetshwayo District

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Abstract

This study examines the chronic causes of school violence at secondary schools in South Africa. The prevalence of violence within South African schools has drawn attention from various stakeholders due to its multifaceted nature. It encompasses forms like bullying, factional conflicts, substance-related incidents, and more. Such violence, whether physical or emotional, inflicts severe harm on both individuals and the educational system. A comprehensive report by the South African Institute of Race Relations highlighted the alarming status of school safety, echoing media coverage that underscored the widespread nature of these issues in schools across the nation. Employing an interpretive paradigm and a case study centered on secondary schools in the King Cetshwayo District sought to explore the causes of violence. The purpose of this study is to identify the underlying causes driving this concerning trend, guided by Social Learning and Social-Ecological Development theories. We used a qualitative method to collect data through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analyses. To ensure the credibility of findings, data from multiple sources was triangulated. Analysis of the data followed thematic approach, and findings were presented thematically. Both internal and external factors influence the causes of school violence, according to the findings. Given these findings, we recommended a collaborative and integrated approach among all stakeholders to effectively tackle and mitigate the pervasive issue of school violence.

Keywords: Causes, Education, Management, Secondary school, South Africa, Violence.

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1. Introduction

The rate at which violence is affecting teaching and learning in South African schools has been alarming in recent times. Media coverage frequently highlights the disturbingly high levels of various violent incidents occurring daily within these educational institutions. Students carrying weapons like guns, knives, and other sharp objects is alarmingly common. These acts of violence not only mirror the challenges prevalent in our communities but also significantly disrupt the proper functioning of schools, impacting education on a larger scale. Schools serve as crucial hubs for learning and social development. Therefore, these institutions must provide a safe environment where quality education and holistic growth can thrive. However, the presence of violence tarnishes this environment and disrupts the educational processes, endangering the well-being of South African children. In the King Cetshwayo district specifically, the prevalence of crimes like murder, sexual harassment, bullying, assault, and property destruction within school premises is alarming. This situation has resulted in learners developing an understandable fear of attending school, leading to disruptions in each scheduled learning and assessment processes. Reflecting on history, the challenges faced by the youth in the Cetshwayo district today echo those endured during the era of the Bantu education system in South Africa. These challenges were among the catalysts for the 1976 Soweto uprising. The cruel experiences suffered by learners during that time, including acts like rape, murder, assault, and abduction within schools, left a lasting impact. Unfortunately, these violent behaviours have persisted, influencing both learners and teachers to resort to violent means such as corporal punishment, physical altercations, and bullying. Shockingly, even today, many schools continue to employ corporal punishment despite its ban more than two decades ago. It is evident that the cycle of violence from the past continues to afflict the youth of today, hindering their growth and development in these critical educational environments. Addressing this issue requires concerted efforts to create safe spaces within schools, ensuring that the educational journey of South African children is free from violence and conducive to their overall well-being and success.

Extreme consequences of violence that occurred recently over the two months in KwaZulu Natal (KZN) include:

- Two security guards were brutally murdered in the classroom at Hammarsdale.
- At Mpumalanga High School, a learner died from beating and stabbing during break time.
- A learner was stabbed to death at Entembeni Secondary School in King Cetshwayo District.
- A learner was stabbed to death at Entembeni Secondary School in King Cetshwayo District. This incident happened shortly after the first one.
- The torching of the principal's office at Mthonjaneni High School in King Cetshwayo District.
- The shooting and death of a teacher on school premises at Folweni in Durban.

This situation creates multifaceted challenges for the effective operation of schools and the broader realm of education. Teachers, primarily trained for teaching roles, find themselves compelled to take on additional responsibilities akin to those of police officers, psychologists, nurses, and even prosecutors when incidents of school violence unfold. This unexpected shift places undue strain on their primary educational duties.

Two varying degrees, types of violence witnessed in schools within the King Cetshwayo district reflect those experienced not only in South Africa but globally. While the frequency, magnitude, and forms of school violence may differ, their potentially disruptive impact on the teaching and learning environment remains consistent across contexts. Therefore, this study seeks to delve into the root causes of school violence, specifically within the secondary schools of King Cetshwayo District. The goal of investigating these causes is to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying issues contributing to the school violence. This understanding can pave the way for targeted interventions and strategies to create safer educational spaces that foster an environment conducive to effective teaching and learning.

1.1. Research Question

What are the causes of school violence at secondary schools in the King Cetshwayo district?

2. Significance of the Study

- i. This study will illuminate the social, economic, and cultural factors intertwined with violence, providing crucial insights for policymakers and communities to address underlying challenges that extend beyond the school environment.
- ii. The study will help us to understand the reasons behind violence and propose intervention strategies to mitigate these issues, fostering a positive educational atmosphere conducive to both students' and educators' well-being.
- iii. Understanding violence in specific districts like, King Cetshwayo, can inform national policies.
- iv. Addressing school violence at its core can prevent long-term negative consequences. Early and effective interventions have the potential to reduce the likelihood of students engaging in criminal activities, thereby contributing to a safer society.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two theories, the social learning theory and the social-ecological model. The social learning theory is utilized to probe into potential causes of violence, positing that individuals aren't inherently predisposed to criminal or defiant behaviour; instead, such conduct is acquired through interactions with others. This theory implies that everyone possesses the potential to engage in deviant behaviour.

Furthermore, in alignment with [Bender and Emslie \[1\]](#) perspective, this study incorporates the ecological model, which transcends traditional views of adolescence and emphasizes the impact of environmental factors and societal contexts on a

young person's developmental processes. Bronfenbrenner [2] ecological systems theory, a key theoretical lens, delineates child development across four nested systems: micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systems, illustrating bidirectional influences within and between these structures. This framework regards social violence as a result of interactions across various level, which include individuals, close relationships, communities, and society. From an ecosystem perspective, an adolescent learner's behaviour and development are shaped by their interactions with school staff, peers, family, and the wider community. The relevance of these theoretical frameworks to the study lies in recognizing that learning commences before formal schooling and continues within school settings where social relationships persist, potentially influencing learners to either become victims or perpetrators of school violence. Individuals derive their experiences and behavioural patterns from relationships within their community and society as indicated by Mpuangan and Ntombela [3] thereby shaping their inclination toward pro-social or anti-social behaviour.

4. Literature Review

It is an undeniable fact that schools are territories prone to crime and violence. Literature by Netshitangani [4]; UNICEF [5]; Dlungwane [6]; Essays [7] and Witmer [8] confirm that schools are territories prone to crime and violence. No one can deny that school violence poses a significant threat to the attainment of educational objectives. Research findings reveal that school violence is now much more frequent than in the past, and it is also more serious. The researcher believes that the significant increase in school violence in recent times has caused some learners to fear going to school, primarily due to their fear of potential harm. The researcher is also concerned about the effects of such a state of mind on learning as part of school functionality. Ncontsa and Shumba [9] validate these concerns, emphasizing the detrimental impact of school violence on the overall success of educational institutions. Learners expressed genuine fears of leaving school premises during breaks and after classes due to potential threats from perpetrators and their associates waiting outside the school gates. Going to school, once an enjoyable experience, has transformed into a distressing environment where learners regularly encounter various forms of violence.

Despite collaborative efforts between the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the South African Police Services (SAPS), as highlighted by Netshitangani [4] the persistence of this issue remains evident. Despite several safe school initiatives, the problem continues to persist. Disturbingly, between January 2018 and June 2019, there were 126 reported cases of incidents within schools, some resulting in tragic fatalities. These reported incidents, detailed in the Table 1 exclusively pertain to the province of KwaZulu-Natal and were categorized as follows:

Table 1.
Reported incidents only in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

Type of incident	Number of cases
Learner-on-learner violence	57
Learner-on-teacher violence	14
Teacher-on-learner violence	3
Bullying, including physical, emotional, and cyberbullying	22
Various forms of abuse, including rape and attempted murder	30

4.1. Externally Causes of School Violence

4.1.1. Poverty in the Community

From a macro systemic perspective on the causes of school violence in South Africa, it can be caused by unabated or extreme poverty. According to Ncontsa and Shumba [9] study on violence in township communities, the majority of learner participants identified poverty as one of the causes of school violence. The researcher concurs with this finding, as a hungry learner may resort to stealing or robbing others of their food or money and defend him or herself by beating those who accuse him or her, and sometimes staff members become victims owing to their intervention in such theft cases.

4.2. Unemployment in the Community

Unemployment is the mother of poverty. It makes people feel frustrated and powerless, forces them to use violence to assert power and stay in control. Unemployment contributes to the learner's poor socio-economic background. Such conditions are likely to influence violent learner behavior, as Smith and Smith (2006) and Haynes (1996) argue in Netshitangani [4]. Netshitangani [4] joined the argument by saying that children coming from unfavourable circumstances seem to be more hostile.

4.3. Culture

Some cultural activities, especially traditional ones like *imigonqo* (confinement rituals), *izindwendwe* (traditional weddings), *imemulo* (traditional coming-of-age ceremonies), *umuthi* (traditional medicine), and others practised in most rural communities, have the potential to cause school violence. During some of these activities, there are games like traditional stick fighting, which historically were meant to train young men for self-defence and war. Dlungwane [6] asserts that stick fighting was just a game but also gave men the opportunity to weigh themselves as far as their fighting and defence skills were concerned. Elders served as monitors and enforced the rules of stick fighting.

4.4. Involvement in Gang Activities

Peer influence according to the researcher, precedes involvement in gang activities. According to [Netshitangani \[4\]](#), the initiation of gang membership occurs when learners perceive the majority of outsiders as successful “heroes” due to their criminal exploits, leading the learners to either emulate or join them. Shier (2008); White (2008), and Brown and Winterton (2010), all in [Netshitangani \[4\]](#) concur with Netshitangani on this issue. Ward (2007) in [Netshitangani \[4\]](#), declares that learners’ sense of identity is shaped by what they see around them.

4.5. Poor Parental Care

[Netshitangani \[4\]](#) asserts that parents who fail to serve as positive role models for their children contribute to the emergence of deviant behavior among them. [Netshitangani \[4\]](#) adds that dysfunctional family backgrounds and structures, often make learners, particularly those in high school, assume the responsibilities of family heads. [Netshitangani \[4\]](#) further discovered that these learners often extend their perceived authority as “heads of household” to teachers and peers. Furthermore, the study revealed that boys from single-mother households lacked father figures to emulate as role models, potentially exacerbating the absence of positive influences. The researcher argues that inadequate parental care, or its absence altogether, frequently results in a deficiency of values among children. This argument finds support from Ward (2007) in [Netshitangani \[4\]](#) who suggests that children are inclined to mimic deviant behavior when parents fail to express disapproval towards it. Tau (2013) in [Dube and Hlalele \[10\]](#) also shares this view, stating that, regrettably, there are instances where parents incite violence against teachers, an issue that has not received extensive attention. This is also evidenced by the reports of very poor attendance at parents’ meetings in schools around King Cetshwayo district.

4.6. Exposure to Mass Media

[Netshitangani \[4\]](#) opines that children who are exposed to television without parental guidance predominantly view movies featuring violent, disrespectful, and morally reprehensible behavior. This contributes to a negative upbringing characterized by aggression and disrespect towards authority figures, including teachers at school. This assertion aligns with the findings of Huesnam et al. (1999), cited in [Netshitangani \[4\]](#) who assert that children exposed to violent imagery on television and lacking strong anti-violence role models are more prone to developing hostility.

4.7. Societal Norms and Values

The researcher believes that socio-cultural norms highly influence individual behaviour. For instance, the general acceptance of violence by the community, as an acceptable means of resolving conflict, is responsible for many types of social violence. Observably, socio-cultural values are rules that can determine the prospects of behaviour within a specific social group. This also applies to values like respect, honesty, and others. The researcher is supported by [Witmer \[8\]](#) who pointed out several community risk factors for youth violence, including weakened economic opportunities, high levels of corruption, and socially disrupted neighbourhoods.

4.8. Non-consequential Department of Basic Education Policies

This is the researcher’s feeling or observation about the suspension and expulsion of learners. He does not have an alternative in place yet but feels that expelling a learner from School A for having assaulted a teacher, for instance, makes the Circuit Manager run around looking for a space to place the same learner in other schools, the learner has not undergone any correctional process, and the new school has not been prepared for the receipt of a violent learner on top of its violence problems. In this case, the unruly learner becomes the hero. In most cases, such learners do not change as they feel they are highly protected by the constitution, and eventually the Department of Basic Education. If they do not do worse, they drop out uncorrected and become a burden to society. This challenge is coupled with budgetary constraints in the Department of Basic Education, as schools do not have counsellors to render counselling services to both learners and school staff. Even at a district level, there will only be two or three (if any) psychologists or counsellors dealing with more than 600 schools.

4.9. Traumatic Events

Traumatic occasions can cause violent behaviour in our youth. More especially, if a person has lost a friend in an accident that they were also part of, they often get angry that they were the ones that lived. [Witmer \[8\]](#) declares that because anger is a normal stage of anguish, an explosion from these learners may be justified. While anger shows high emotions, it is normally not acceptable to be violent against other people.

4.10. Internally Causes of School Violence

4.10.1. Unhealthy School Relationships

Unhealthy school relationships manifest in violence. [Mncube \[11\]](#); [Francia and Edling \[12\]](#) and [Khanyile and Mpuangnan \[13\]](#) concur that unhealthy relationships in school matters are a possible cause of violence. [Mashaba \[14\]](#) cites a case in which learner in the Eastern Cape murdered a teacher due to the student’s academic failure. [Stoddard \[15\]](#) concurred with the South African Council of Churches and Cyril Ramaphosa, who was then the Deputy President of both the African National Congress (ANC) and South Africa, when they claimed that owing to unhealthy relationships, South African schools are becoming “mafia” schools. [Davids and Waghid \[16\]](#) join other scholars in indicating that the bad relations among teachers, between teachers and learners, and among learners themselves contribute to the escalation of violence.

4.11. Communication Breakdown in Schools

Unhealthy school relationships are a contributing factor. The researcher posits that once communication breaks down, relationships change from normal to abnormal, and violence erupts. The researcher argues that when learners and teachers opt for the use of violence, it indicates anger, communication breakdown, and loss of trust. In support of this, [Chamane \[17\]](#) provides evidence of a student assaulting a teacher following a discussion about cell phone usage in class.

4.12. Lack of Transformation in Schools

South Africa has been a democratic country since 1994. The researcher's observation is that some of the country's institutions and their internal policies still exist in the pre-1994 era. This, the researcher argues, leads to confrontations between those who aspire to democratic leadership and those who practice undemocratic leadership. The researcher agrees with [Dube and Hlalele \[10\]](#) when they equate non-transformation with social injustice that encourages school violence, an injustice that comprises bad treatment of learners and teachers, poor distribution of resources, inconsiderateness of gender, and biased racial statements that damage learners' reputations and teachers characters. [Mncube \[11\]](#) supports other scholars on this issue by stating that some school leaders and teachers, in general, are authoritarians, creating tense relations in the school that may escalate into school violence. Given the substantial positive influence of motivation and a participatory leadership approach on staff performance [Mpuangnan, et al. \[18\]](#) it becomes evident that school management should prioritize supporting their staff members' endeavors to address and reduce violence within schools.

4.13. Unprofessional Activities of Teachers

Teachers' unprofessional activities include, among others, high absenteeism, failure to mark learners' work, drinking liquor with learners, entering into sexual relationships with learners, using derogatory comments, bullying and verbally abusing learners, and skipping classes [\[19\]](#). These offences can all contribute to school violence. [Mpuangnan, et al. \[20\]](#) concur that it is important for teachers to maintain high standards of professionalism and that any behaviour by teachers that sums up a lack of professionalism and morals invites violence. King Cetshwayo district, like all other districts, has cases of teachers and support staff who behaved or behaved in an unbecoming manner, thereby compromising school functionality as their behaviour incite or incited school violence.

4.14. Corporal Punishment

South Africa is among 122 countries in the world that have banned corporal punishment in schools since 1996. Despite the official ban on corporal punishment by the Department of Basic Education, many South African teachers continue to administer it. [Morrel \(2001\)](#), in [Grobler \[21\]](#) attests to the use of corporal punishment by many South African teachers. Unfortunately, some parents support this disciplinary measure. [Hyman and Perone \(1998\)](#) state in [Grobler \[21\]](#) that there is evidence that the practice of corporal punishment and verbal abuse escalates learners' misconduct. [Mncube \[11\]](#); [Breen, et al. \[22\]](#); [Barnes \[23\]](#) and [Nzama and Ajani \[24\]](#) have common concerns that even though corporal punishment is banned in South Africa, it still remains widespread in the country.

4.15. Alcohol and Drug Misuse

[Kost-Smith, et al. \[25\]](#) state that the use of alcohol and drugs puts the youth at risk for physical abuse and hostility among themselves, and that the connection between violence and substance misuse is due to the severe and prolonged pharmacological effects of drugs on a particular individual's functioning. [Khanyile and Mpuangnan \[13\]](#) agree with the other researchers who mentioned that the use of drugs and alcohol puts the youth at risk for violence and that disruption in mental processes, illogical behaviour, increased stimulation, and less inhibition of hostile compulsions escalate violence.

4.16. Access to Dangerous Weapons

An undisputed truth is that schools do not manufacture, sell, or keep weapons. Weapons that end up being used on school premises are carried to schools by learners from the community. Inside their classrooms or on school grounds, learners have suffered stabbings or gunshots. [Bowman \(2012\)](#), in [Mthiyane \[26\]](#), assumed that violence was rampant in South African schools. [Bowman](#) made this assumption after a report published in the *Sunday Times* (on August 12, 2012). The report was about a fellow Umlazi learner murdering an Umlazi learner the previous Friday. The motivation for the murder was robbery, as the murdered learner was carrying R500 to pay for the matric farewell function.

4.17. Lack of Discipline

According to [Chepkilot and Kiprop \(2011\)](#) in [Masingi \[27\]](#) discipline aims to make one take responsibility for their actions. [Azizi \(2009\)](#), in [Masingi \[27\]](#) agrees with this assertion. In fact, all the researchers who contributed to the research about violence or discipline have parallel notions, and yet write from a wide background of differing perspectives. [Masingi \[27\]](#) refers to discipline as the preparation of learners, using suitable teaching and processes, in a way that promotes logical involvement in education and does not interrupt the rights of others. The researcher argues that good discipline in every class and throughout the school is a prerequisite for successful teaching and learning. Lack of discipline at a school is a recipe for chaos and violence, as this would mean learners and teachers do as they wish and do not respect the rights of others.

4.18. Poor Leadership in Schools

Today, as education expands, new curricula are being introduced in schools, and social ills and behavioural challenges from both teachers and learners increase, the role of principals is also changing in many ways. Schools today might need strong principals who are visionaries, who chart both long- and short-term strategies, considering external and internal risks and changes to the school environment. According to Mendels [28], schools need leaders who can create a hospitable and safe climate with an obliging spirit and make other fundamentals of productive collaboration successful. The researcher agrees with Mendels and argues that poor management and leadership are themselves risks for school violence. Good management and leadership also mean harmonious working between School Management Teams (SMTs) and School Governing Bodies (SGBs).

4.19. Unexplained School Policies Dealing with Deviant Behaviour

One such policy is the school code of conduct. Ncontsa and Shumba [9] suggest that school codes of conduct should be clearly explained to learners, teachers, and parents. The researcher argues that in many schools learners, teachers, and parents cannot draw a line between what is accepted and not accepted conduct in schools. The researcher is supported by SACE [29] in his further argument that the school functionality is highly dependent on the behaviour of all stakeholders, and in particular learners, as they constitute the largest number on the school premises, hence the need for friendly, fair, owned by all, and firmly implemented policies.

5. Research Methodology

5.1. Research Paradigm

The interpretive paradigm focuses on comprehending the world through the subjective experiences of individuals, emphasizing qualitative methodologies [21]. In line with this perspective, Grobler suggests that the interpretive paradigm adopts a relativist ontological position, viewing reality as a subjective "mental construction" shaped by an individual's social experiences. Consequently, this paradigm acknowledges the existence of multiple interpretations or realities surrounding events. The goal of this study was to understand how school violence affects the operational aspects of secondary schools in the King Cetshwayo district.

Tracy [30] supports this view by explaining that, from an interpretive standpoint (also termed constructivist), reality isn't an entity that a researcher can simply explain, describe, or translate into a research report. Instead, both reality and knowledge are actively constructed and reproduced through communication, interactions, and practices, with the researcher acting as a mediator and shaping the understanding of reality. Thanh and Thanh [31] highlight the close association between the interpretive paradigm and qualitative methodology. They emphasize that researchers employing these methods aim to gather data based on individuals' experiences, understandings, and perceptions to reveal reality, prioritizing qualitative insights over abstract statistics or numerical data. We deemed the interpretive paradigm, with its ontological and epistemological underpinnings, the most appropriate framework for aligning with the objectives of this study.

5.2. Research Design

The researcher opted for the case study method to investigate the influence of violence on school functionality. Creswell [32] defines a case study as an intensive examination of a, well-defined entity, aiming to collect extensive data for a comprehensive understanding and interpretation of a selected scenario. Similarly, Masoga [33] describes case study research as focusing on analyzing a specific group, project, institution, or company. Fundamentally, case studies entail a detailed exploration of the elements that contribute to the distinctive attributes of the subject under scrutiny.

5.3. Sampling

The researcher employed purposive sampling to specifically identify and select a sample rich in pertinent information. The researcher chose two secondary schools as the focal points of a multiple-site case study design. Within these sites, the researcher targeted two principals, two heads of departments, two post-level one teachers, and two learners (one representative from each category in each school) for semi-structured interviews. These participants willingly shared their insights and experiences with the researcher [34]. Utilizing this selected group within their respective school settings, the researcher engaged intensively with them to deeply explore and interactively investigate the underlying causes of school violence. Below is a summary of Table 2, depicting the profiles of the participants involved in the study:

Table 2.
Total number of study participants.

School	Principals	Departmentalheads	Post level 1 teacher	Learners	Total
School A	1	1	1	1	4
School B	1	1	1	1	4
Total	2	2	2	2	8

5.4. Data Collection Methods

Khumalo and Utefe [35] highlight the value of incorporating multiple sources of evidence in effective case studies. Additionally, Merriam [36] emphasizes that qualitative inquiry, which centres on understanding context-bound meanings, necessitates data collection tools capable of discerning underlying significance during data generation and interpretation. Bearing these considerations in mind, the researcher employed a variety of data generation instruments, namely, semi-

structured interviews, observation, and document analysis in this study. This multifaceted approach to data collection allowed the researcher to ensure triangulation, and cross-validate findings across different methods for a more comprehensive understanding of the subject.

5.5. Data Analysis

The researcher engaged in a comprehensive process of interpreting data using De Vos, et al. [37] method for narrative analysis. This involved meticulous examination of transcripts, identification of recurring categories in the data, creation of an encompassing theme list, clustering and organizing these themes based on similarities, and then assigning relevant codes to match the themes with the data. The data was systematically organized into appropriate themes and subthemes, with coding facilitating the development of these themes. The following chapter delves into the discussion of the emergent themes that result from this analytical approach.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1. Subtheme 1: Perceptions of School Violence

This subtheme relates to what participants understood about school violence and its components. Findings from this study revealed that participants understood school violence as causing instability in schools, being harmful, disturbing school operations, causing disorder, causing danger, and wasting teaching and learning time. This was supported by Principal 1, who referred to “incidents that can cause instability at school.”

To clarify the above, Departmental Head 1 had this to say:

“These are acts of disorder that happen in a school as a centre of learning. These acts of violence can be physical or non-physical. They can be between learners, learners on teachers, and teachers on learners.”

Teacher 2 noted the effects of violence:

“School violence is about violent acts between two or more people from the school. It may disrupt school and waste a lot of teaching and learning time.”

Learner 1 acknowledged teacher-on-learner violence when she said:

“This is fighting, bullying, insulting, and disrespecting by learners at school, and sometimes teachers do insult and physically harm learners through corporal punishment,”

From these views, participants understand violence as physical and non-physical, and as badly affecting school operations or activities. This understanding is in line with the definition of school violence by Prinsloo and Nesor (2007) in Ncontsa and Shumba [9] who said: “School violence is regarded as any intentional physical or non-physical (verbal) condition or act resulting in physical or non-physical pain being inflicted on the recipient of that act while the recipient is under the school supervision.” School violence emanates from physical and non-physical acts that disrupt teaching and learning, resulting in fights and attacks on victims.

6.2. Subtheme 2: Externally Influenced Causes of School Violence

This subtheme relates to what participants understood to be the causes of school violence. Findings from this study revealed that participants were aware that some of the causes of school violence were externally influenced, and that schools may not have much power to mitigate them. Many participants mentioned domestic/community violence/quarrels spilling over into schools, and individual participants mentioned poverty, lack of parental care, laws of the country not being effective enough, theft, *muthi* (traditional medicine), and mass media.

On domestic or community violence,

Principal 2 had this to say:

“There was once a traditional ceremony in the area, more or less eight kilometres from the school. In that ceremony, liquor was served, and two of our boys quarrelled over it, and they fought. They stopped fighting when separated by the elders and induna (traditional councillor) present at that ceremony. On Monday, during break, those boys started fighting again. We found ourselves having to resolve a situation that we had no understanding of, and the school stopped functioning as this was developing into a faction fight. The SAPS had to be called, and community elders were summoned to intervene.”

In support of Principal 2,

Departmental Head 1 commented:

“People in this area believe in fighting. Insulting others is just like a game; many fights start from that.”

Teacher 1 explained:

“Some of our learners are so exposed to family fights that they don’t see it as violence to slap and beat someone anyhow, causing serious harm. When exposed to such conditions, a learner may become violent towards other students, as they may adopt this behavior as a habit from their family members, without receiving any discipline.”

Learner 1 confirmed this assertion and said:

“One violent boy here at school is my neighbour at home. For sure, he takes this from home as his parents are always making a noise, swearing at each other, and fighting each other. Even his siblings do not have a sense of peace.”

Learner 2 recounted:

“During examination time in November 2019, there was a faction fight at school. Two boys from different residential areas started fighting immediately after the morning assembly. Within a very short time, there were a number of community members and some known elders at the school gate. These were from different areas, under different izinduna (traditional councillors). They were giving weapons to learners, assisting them to continue fighting. This matter was taken to the Inkosi

(Tribal Chief) and his traditional council. Fortunately, there were no deaths, but five boys ended up in hospital. We were told that this was due to a grudge as the two boys engaged in a stick fighting game during *udwendwe* (traditional wedding), and thereafter the girlfriend of the loser was taken by the winner.”

On lack of parental care, Departmental Head 1 said:

“It is not a good thing to say, but really, some learners are as good as not having parents, although having them; is in terms of love, care, protection, and mentorship. You will find that both parents are alcoholics, unemployed, and never available whenever the school needs them. This makes the learner develop a resentful resilience, which goes with the notion of the survival of the fittest, meaning a child has to do whatever he/she can survive, which results in him or her being violent.”

On *muthi*, Departmental Head 2 shared this:

“Some of these boys have *izincweba* (traditional medicine belts) that they wear around their waists or their arms between the elbow and the shoulder. These make them see anyone as nobody, and they also crave fighting. They become very brave and fearless and listen to no one when they are wearing them. One boy in Grade Nine is very good at mixing *muthi* for fighting; *ukushaya aze akwelule yena bese ubuyela esimweni sakho* (he is the only one that can bring you back to normality after beating you), otherwise you can be paralysed for life.”

Departmental Head 2 again as the only participant who mentioned mass media, had this to say:

“Broadcasting violent episodes or news on our TVs is at a high rate. Although adult supervision is critical so that viewing by children is controlled, some parents, for different reasons, sleep before their children go to bed, some learners stay with grandparents, and so many other issues make control impossible. This creates a culture of violence in some students, and they begin to live violent lives.

Teacher 2 had this to say about poverty:

“The instances of theft at school are increasing, and most of the suspects or learners caught with stolen things are from poverty-stricken families where no one is employed, or there are many dependents, and one person is working, but not getting a good salary due to the type of work done. It becomes very difficult to recover stolen property; it is probably quickly sold to get cash. In most cases, rucksacks and cell phones are stolen. Although cell phones are not allowed at school, learners do bring them.”

This is in line with the findings of [Ncontsa and Shumba \[9\]](#) who said that 55 of the learners who participated in their study on violence in township communities proclaimed that poverty causes violence. This is so because a hungry learner may resort to stealing or robbing others of their food or money and defend him or herself by beating those who accuse him or her.

Learner 2 had this to say about the laws of the country not being effective enough:

“There is no balance between rights and responsibilities. We learners most of the time boast about rights that we have, so a 14-year-old learner can shoot and kill a person, but because of his age, the law becomes soft on him. What about the right to life of a dead person? Teachers are not allowed to beat us, but learners beat teachers and fight each other every day. What happens?”

It is evident from the participant’s responses that not only the immediate environment of the school contributes to school-based violence, but other social settings outside the school also contribute. This is supported by [SACE \[29\]](#); [Mthiyane \[26\]](#); [Khaled \[38\]](#) and [Netshitangani \[4\]](#) who concur that school violence, more often are influenced and shaped by circumstantial factors.

Among factors contributing to school-based violence are the different social settings within which young people operate, including the school environment, the family, and the broader communities in which they live. The different settings in which schoolchildren find themselves, as well as the people that they come into contact within these contexts, converge to constitute a significant source of violence.

6.3. Subtheme 3: Internally Influenced Causes of School Violence

This subtheme relates to participants’ awareness of causes of school violence other than the aforementioned. Findings revealed that these are due to learners’, teachers’, and support staff’s actions as well as flaws or gaps in a particular school system to do with the immediate environment of the school. Many participants mentioned possession of weapons at school, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage dating, theft, and lack of supervision by teachers. Individual participants mentioned labelling, competition in performance, age, peer pressure, communication breakdown, unprofessional conduct by teachers, and lack of respect.

On possession of weapons by learners, Principal 1 commented:

“At one stage a learner brought a gun (9 mm parabellum) to school, but fortunately he was reported by a teacher who got the information from a learner in the same class. When parents were summoned to school, they said the gun belonged to a brother, as the brother was a policeman.”

Departmental Head 2 confirmed the carrying of weapons by learners:

“It was very sad when a boy learner was stabbed with a long, rusty rod, taken to the clinic and later to hospital. This learner was not part of the fight – he was stabbed by mistake.”

Teacher 1 revealed:

“In this school, we have a collection of different kinds and sizes of knives taken from learners, knobkerries and bush knives. These are kept in a cabinet in the principal’s office.”

Learner 2 added:

“Sometimes these weapons are hidden in girl learners’ rucksacks, and when the fight starts the girls hand them over to boys.”

The carrying of dangerous weapons to schools by learners is a widespread problem. This is confirmed by a *Sunday Tribune* (12 August 2012:15) report which stated that an Umlazi boy learner was stabbed to death for his R500 he was carrying to pay for a matriculation dance by a classmate on the previous Friday.

On drugs and alcohol abuse, Principal 2 said:

“Learners do use drugs; some of them act very funny after breaks. On close observation, it is found that learners are under the influence of drugs. Even the girls do this. Three Grade 12 girls dropped out of school in 2018 owing to drug abuse.”

Departmental Head 1 confirmed this assertion:

“In 2018 a group of learners smoked dagga, drank alcohol and came to school at 10h00 with mob spirit to fight boys from another section in the area that they were at loggerheads with. They did not find them, and attacked teachers in the staffroom, thinking that their enemies had been hidden by staff members. They broke windows and doors but did not harm the staff members. This resulted in five full days of non-teaching and learning as teachers were not prepared to go to class after that incident. The situation was brought back to normal by the intervention of the Circuit Manager, SGB and traditional leadership.”

Teacher 2 had a very fresh story to tell:

“There is a case just now in the principal’s office. Two boys were caught smoking dagga within the school premises yesterday. Their parents are here today as per the school’s invitation.”

Learner 1 commented:

“Last year, it was the closing day in the third quarter, I remember well, that three boys were caught by teachers smoking dagga in the toilet. They were from Grades 8, 9 and 10.”

The other cause that was mentioned by many participants was dating among learners. In confirming that,

Principal 1 said:

*“This is the common case in many schools, including mine. Some girls have boyfriends in pairs, and we have seen these boys fighting, each boy claiming the ownership of the girl. It is fortunate that such situations turn out to be an embarrassment in TV programmes like *Cheaters* and *Uyajola* (you are dating) 99. When the cheaters are exposed. I hope they are learning lessons.”*

In support of this, Departmental Head 1 said:

“Some of the fights are due to the fact that a boy wants to prove a point to his girlfriend.”

Teacher 1 confirmed this assertion:

“When a boy or a girl has started dating, their behaviour changes in some of them as they always want to impress their dates.”

Learner 2 presented a different perspective:

“Violence due to teenage dating is not only because of girls cheating, but boys may also have more than one girlfriend in the same school, and girls end up fighting or verbally abusing each other.”

Theft was the fourth cause of school violence mentioned by many participants. **Principal 2** had this to say about it:

“Theft is another factor that plays a role in school violence. One learner steals another learner’s cell phone (though cell phones are outlawed in our school), or a rucksack or school bag.”

When a teacher tries to investigate, he gets no support because no one is prepared to testify, give evidence, or point out the perpetrator. The victim then takes the law into his own hands and hunts down the thief and gives him or her beating after school or within the school premises. Cell phones are the main target of thieves in the school. They tempt even those learners who are not thieves. Rucksacks and shoulder bags of different brand names are the second target.”

Departmental Head 2 supported this assertion:

“Cell phones are a problem. The teacher confiscated a cell phone during examination time from a boy learner who was copying from it. Unfortunately, it got stolen from the staffroom, and the boy became so rude to the teacher that the teacher ended up replacing the phone.”

Learner 1 confirmed this:

“In this school, bags with well-known brand names are stolen, and learners end up fighting.”

Lack of supervision was also mentioned by many participants.

Principal 1 commented:

“It happens sometimes that two or three teachers are not at school owing to workshops or other reasons. This puts the school in a situation where during some periods learners may not have teachers with them. It is during this time that some of the problems start.”

Departmental Head 2 confirmed this:

“Sometimes the Department organises to take teachers out of school. If the school has three or more teachers absent, it becomes possible that during some periods learners may not have teachers with them. This is when learners end up causing trouble.”

However, Learner 1 came up with another perspective:

“Some teachers are late in coming to class after breaks, and sometimes dodge their periods, and this causes chaos. Learners move around causing trouble even in other classes where there are no teachers.”

Learner 2 commented:

“One day teachers were in the staffroom for a briefing during teaching hours. We heard a loud noise and screaming coming from our neighbouring class. Two girls were fighting and insulting each other. This disturbed the whole school as there were no adults to stop it.”

The following causes were mentioned in one or two interviews out of eight.

On communication breakdown,

Departmental Head 1 had this to say:

“Some problems originate from communication breakdowns. For instance, a teacher under my direct supervision took a leave of absence without informing either me or the principal. As a result, no arrangements were made in time as to how her work was to be shared by others, and the leave was two weeks, which meant there was going to be no substitute teacher from the Department of Basic Education. We did experience some problems with learner behavior as a result.”

This is consistent with what is stated by [Chamane \[17\]](#) that once communication breaks down, relationships change from normal to abnormal, and violence erupts.

Departmental Head 2 had this to say about the lack of respect and commitment:

“This is also noticeable when bells ring. We were together with the SGB Chairperson some days ago when the bell rang in the morning, and two boys and a girl were walking towards the school gate from home. Even when they heard the bell they continued to walk very slowly, as if they had no intention of coming to school. We motivated them to walk quickly, but it was as if we were talking to ourselves.”

Teacher 1 commented on learner age:

“Overage learners are a problem as they sometimes want special treatment and tend to disrespect teachers by influencing young learners not to take orders from teachers. They believe they are mature enough to not require supervision at school, leading one to question their presence there.”

Interview extracts in this subtheme are evidence of what is said by researchers like [Mncube \[11\]](#); [Mthiyane \[26\]](#) and [Turner, et al. \[39\]](#) that there are many contributory factors to school violence, which implies that there are several intersecting factors leading to school violence.

6.4. Subtheme 4: Corporal Punishment

This theme relates to what participants understood as the consequences of using corporal punishment, and their feelings about its continued use, although it was banned 24 years ago. Findings revealed that corporal punishment is still used in many schools and that participants were aware that administering corporal punishment is a criminal offence, but seemed not to be aware of what it does to the life of a learner who is a victim of it. This is supported by the following interview extracts.

Principal 1 said:

“Corporal punishment is still administered in my school, but not in my presence since they know I’m totally against it. As the principal, I workshop all my teachers during staff meetings about Section No:10 of the Schools Act of 1996, which makes it clear that it is not allowed.”

Principal 2 confirmed this assertion:

“Truly speaking, corporal punishment is administered at school by the majority of teachers, and sometimes the principal. Although outlawed, it is the quickest way to resolve conflict or to bring about discipline. No time is wasted, and learners know how to treat each other in a scholarly way. No teacher is left behind with work, and it encourages learners to achieve the desired results. It produces outstanding citizens. The alternatives to corporal punishment are very punitive to teachers in the school. If learners are detained after school, the teacher must supervise them. That is detrimental to the teacher because it eats at his family’s time.”

It is worth noting that in this school corporal punishment seems to be permitted because even the principal administers it and praises it as a good measure of building character. It is such behaviour that Walsh (1991) in [Mohapi \[40\]](#) is referring to when she says “In certain schools, principals are the ones administering corporal punishment, yet they are implementers of policies, and by their positions they are to give direction in school activities, including disciplinary issues.”

It is also worth noting that Departmental Head 1 was quite aware of the consequences of administering corporal punishment, but went on to support Principal 2 when he said:

“Corporal punishment was long ago banned and prohibited by Section 10 of the South African Schools Act of 1996, but despite the ban on corporal punishment 24 years ago, teachers in school are still hitting learners to correct them from misbehaving. My feeling about administering corporal punishment in school is that it is illegal and tantamount to expulsion. Although it is illegal, we as teachers believe that learners who receive corporal punishment are more disciplined and hardworking. Lack of consequences and punishment can increase violent behaviour by learners. Other methods of discipline are not as effective as corporal punishment.”

Departmental Head 2 commented:

“Corporal punishment is not administered in our school as per the South African Schools Act of 1996.”

Teacher 1 came from another angle when she said:

“I don’t have a problem with it, but it must be manageable and discussed with a learner first to reach an agreement about it.”

Teacher 2 said:

“The use of corporal punishment may not assist because these learners are violent by nature, so it may cause even more problems.”

Learner 1 came up with this:

“Corporal punishment helps. It does not kill, but it corrects. Learners have rights which are not necessary. Our parents are well groomed because of corporal punishment.”

Learner 2 supported corporal punishment with a caution:

“Corporal punishment is bad when a teacher has a grudge against a learner because the learner sometimes ends up being injured, but it helps in stopping learners doing wrong things.”

It was evident from the study that a considerable portion of participants regarded corporal punishment as an acceptable means of discipline, with only a minority considering it outdated and violent. Despite this, there is a prevailing continuation of corporal punishment in schools, despite assertions by Akhtar and Awan [41] that it causes physical pain and violates children's basic rights. Researchers identify corporal punishment as both a contributing factor and manifestation of violence. It not only leads to harmful emotional and behavioral consequences but also influences how children handle interpersonal conflicts. Mncube [11] and Breen, et al. [22] concur that corporal punishment is unethical and exacerbates violence within school environments. It's crucial to recognize that children have a right to education free from punitive measures.

7. Recommendations

The discovery that both internal and external factors influence the causes of school violence suggests that schools cannot effectively curb violence on their own. This study puts it clearly that curbing school violence cannot be a one-man task. Therefore, we recommend strengthening the relationship between the schools, parents, community, and government. Mitigating violence in schools should be a combined effort to solve the problem by all stakeholders, namely, school, parents, community members, and their various institutions, as well as government structures. According to Ngidi [42] schools should teach learners about abuse and its consequences. Learners model what they experience in their society, and therefore, society can be used to expose them to peace and harmony through programmes initiated by their schools. The government should strive for equal distribution of resources to society, as poverty is found to be one of the causes of school violence. The government has the huge task of fighting gender-based violence, which is rife in the country.

Local municipalities, social workers and health departments should work closer with schools to deal with learners' social ills. The researcher suggests empowering learners and parents to address violence. Working closely with learners' families could promote a non-violent home environment, which will reduce levels of violence in schools. The social learning theory, which is one of the theoretical frameworks underpinning this study explains that individual behaviour is acquired, maintained, and modified through interaction with society. Therefore, parents and communities should be agents of peace and positive conflict resolution. Experts could be invited to address parents about violence management during their meetings at school. The same experts could also instruct staff and learners on how to manage violence effectively. Research confirms that violence within families is owing to the inability to resolve conflicts constructively [26].

8. Conclusion

Examining the roots of school violence in South Africa's secondary education system, particularly in the King Cetshwayo District, demands a comprehensive analysis using the social learning theory. This theoretical lens delves into the interconnected elements that fuel the perpetuation of violence within these academic settings. Within the context of school violence, this theory emphasizes the profound impact of the social background within these schools. Students, influenced by peer interactions, institutional norms, and societal expectations, might internalize, and replicate violent behaviours they witness or encounter. Moreover, societal violence, economic inequalities, and cultural dynamics intersect within the school environment, influencing students' conduct. Furthermore, within the framework of social learning theory, we cannot undervalue the pivotal role of authority figures like teachers and administrators. Their actions and responses to instances of violence set implicit examples for students, shaping their perceptions of acceptable behaviour. Establishing positive role models and cultivating a supportive, non-violent school culture through these figures can significantly influence students' attitudes and actions. Effectively addressing the roots of school violence in the King Cetshwayo District calls for a holistic approach that recognizes the multifaceted nature of the issue. Solutions should include strategies to restructure the social climate in schools, encourage positive peer interactions, implement mentorship programs, and offer support to both students and educators. Collaboration with the community and local authorities is equally crucial to tackle the broader societal issues that contribute to the cycle of violence in these educational settings.

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